Home-Thoughts, from Abroad

POEM TEXT

Oh, to be in England
Now that April's there,
And whoever wakes in England
Sees, some morning, unaware,
That the lowest boughs and the brushwood sheaf
Round the elm-tree bole are in tiny leaf,
While the chaffinch sings on the orchard bough
In England—now!

And after April, when May follows,
And the whitethroat builds, and all the swallows!
Hark, where my blossomed pear-tree in the hedge
Leans to the field and scatters on the clover
Blossoms and dewdrops—at the bent spray's edge—
That's the wise thrush; he sings each song twice over,
Lest you should think he never could recapture
The first fine careless rapture!
And though the fields look rough with hoary dew,
All will be gay when noontide wakes anew
The buttercups, the little children's dower
—Far brighter than this gaudy melon-flower!

SUMMARY

Oh, if only I were in England, now that it's April. Whoever wakes up in England in the springtime will, one morning, be surprised to see that the low branches and the undergrowth around the elm tree are starting to put out fresh little leaves, and to hear that the chaffinches are singing in the orchards. That's what's happening in England, right now!

And spring in England is still wonderful when May comes along—when the whitethroat (another songbird) builds its nest, and the swallows build theirs. Listen! Over there in my pear tree, which is covered in blossoms, and leans over the hedge dropping petals and dew onto the clover-covered field—from the tip of that tree's bending branches, you can hear the thrush. This wise bird always repeats his song, so no one makes the mistake of thinking that he can't sing a song so effortless, beautiful, and joyful twice. And while the fields look raggedy and grey when they're wet with dew in the morning, they'll soon seem to overflow with delight when the bright sun of noon again wakes up the buttercups, the flowers that grow especially for little kids. Those buttercups are much lovelier than this garish melon blossom I see next to me now!

THEMES

THE POWER OF HOMESICKNESS

The speaker of "Home-thoughts, from Abroad" is spending their time "abroad" in a lush landscape blossoming with "melon-flower[s]"—but all they really want is to be at home in England. England might not be exotic or exciting, but it's the place the speaker loves best, and thus has a hold on the speaker that no foreign beauty can displace. The speaker's wistful visions of England's springtime loveliness suggests that homesickness is a powerful and poignant force.

Springtime awakens the speaker's yearning for home: no spring "abroad," in the speaker's view, can possibly match the delicate loveliness of English "blossoms and dewdrops." With a passionate cry—"Oh, to be in England / Now that April's there"—the speaker falls into a reverie over all the springtime sights and sounds they remember from their native country. The speaker's detailed memories of particular birds and plants—how they sing, when they grow—suggest just how familiar the speaker is with the English spring, and how much they long to experience those comforting, homey sights and sounds again.

Lost in homesickness and nostalgia, the speaker barely seems to pay attention to the foreign country they're in at the moment. In fact, they only bring it up to dismiss it! Humble English "buttercups," they note, are lovelier by far than the "gaudy melon-flower" that grows beside them now. The word "gaudy" here suggests that, under the spell of homesickness, the speaker sees this land's exotic beauty as rather vulgar and excessive: the simple pleasures of home have a pull that no flashy foreign flora can match.

By spending long passages of description on the remembered English spring, and barely a line on the speaker's present surroundings, the poem suggests that homesickness can be overwhelmingly powerful. The speaker's longing for home means that they barely see the world around them: while the speaker is in the grips of homesickness, only England will do for them.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-20

SPRING AND RENEWAL

The poem's speaker is full of wistful memories of springtime in England. Even when the speaker is far from home, they know exactly what's happening "in England—now!": simply because it's April, they can say with certainty what plants are growing, what birds are singing, and how the air smells at home. Not only are these visions of spring beautiful, the speaker implies, they're also comforting: part of the glory of spring, to this speaker, is that one can always count on it to return, renewing the world in just the same ways it always does.

Thinking of the glories of the English spring from afar, the speaker goes into raptures over the thought of plants from "buttercups" to "brushwood," and the different songs of the "chaffinch," the "thrush," and the "swallow." These beauties might be humbler than the "gaudy melon-flower" that grows "abroad," but the mere thought of them moves the speaker deeply: the English spring, to this speaker, has an inimitable loveliness.

A big part of the glory of spring, in this speaker's eyes, is that one can count on it! Even from far away, the speaker knows exactly what grows in "April" and in "May," and what songs the birds are singing. They can even imagine exactly how each day progresses: how the fields look as they shake off the "hoary dew" of the early morning, and how the buttercups open at "noontide." Spring is delightful not just because it's beautiful, but because it follows comforting, familiar, timeless rhythms.

And there's nothing boring about that predictability. When the speaker describes the "wise thrush" singing its song twice in a row, the songbird might as well be speaking for spring itself, demonstrating that nature can do what might seem impossible: it can "recapture / That first fine careless rapture." In other words, part of the joy of spring is that it's always the same—and yet, its beauties feel new and fresh every time they reappear.

Spring, this poem suggests, is a time of joy, not just because it fills the world with the beauty of new life, but because that new life can always be counted on to return, over and over.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-20

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

Oh, to be in England
Now that April's there,
And whoever wakes in England
Sees, some morning, unaware,

"Home-Thoughts, from Abroad" begins with a wistful sigh. "Oh, to be in England," the speaker says, "Now that April's there." Far from home, this speaker is terribly homesick—especially now that it's springtime. In fact, to this speaker, it seems to be April only "there," in England: wherever they are now, April just doesn't feel the same.

In these first four lines, the speaker is getting caught up in a reverie, their thoughts carrying them far away from the foreign country where they sit now. What especially catches the speaker's fancy is the idea of the morning when "whoever wakes in England" looks out their window "some morning" to see that spring has arrived for real. This poem will capture, not just the speaker's longing for home, but the pure joy of spring renewal.

Take a look at the way the structure of these first lines captures the speaker's yearning:

Oh, to be in England
Now that April's there,
And whoever wakes in England
Sees, || some morning, || unaware,

The diacope on "in England" here (strengthened by enjambments that leave those words prominent at the ends of lines) makes it feel like the speaker's mind is being drawn back, over and over, to their beloved home.

And the caesurae in line 4 create breathy pauses—as if the speaker is anticipating a surprise, barely able to contain their delight. "Whoever wakes in England," that changed rhythm suggests, has no idea of all the beauty that's about to hit them when they draw the curtains "some morning."

LINES 5-8

That the lowest boughs and the brushwood sheaf
Round the elm-tree bole are in tiny leaf,
While the chaffinch sings on the orchard bough
In England—now!

In these lines, the speaker paints a picture of what those who "wake[] in England" will see some unexpected morning: the spring just starting to come into its own.

As the speaker begins to describe the sights and sounds of early spring in England, the poem's meter and rhyme undergo a transformation as sudden as the landscape's. The poem began with a back-and-forth ABAB rhyme scheme, and in lines of (mostly) trochaic trimeter (lines of three trochees, metrical feet with a DUM-da rhythm). Listen to what happens now:

That the low- | est boughs | and the brush- | wood sheaf
Round the elm- | tree bole | are in ti- | ny leaf,
While the chaf- | finch sings | on the or- | chard bough

Switching to longer, steadier tetrameter lines of alternating

anapests (feet with a da-da-DUM rhythm) and iambs (feet with a da-DUM rhythm), the speaker seems to have gotten almost hypnotized by memories of England in the spring. These lines have a rolling, swinging motion like a gentle walk in the countryside. Rhymed couplets strengthen this mood of absorption and harmony.

And look at the specific imagery the speaker is using here. The speaker is thinking not just of any old leaves growing on any old trees, but the "tiny," brand-new leaves that spring out on the "elm-tree bole." And they're hearing, not just birdsong, but the specific, familiar song of the "chaffinch." These are vivid and particular memories of sights and sounds the speaker must have encountered in person many, many times.

But this rapturous remembrance shops short. Take a look at the caesura here:

> While the chaffinch sings on the orchard bough
> In England—|| now!

It's as if the speaker can only bear to think of England's new growth and birdsong for so long. The last line of the first stanza comes to an abrupt, halting close: that caesura makes it sound as if they might be choking back some tears as they think of what's happening "in England—now!"

LINES 9-10

> *And after April, when May follows,*
> *And the whitethroat builds, and all the swallows!*

In the closing line of the first stanza, the speaker seemed, perhaps, to choke up a little, thinking of England's faraway beauties. Now, after a stanza break that might suggest a meditative pause, the speaker launches into another set of rapturous memories—this time about what happens when spring has really settled in.

Listen to the polyptoton in these lines:

> And after April, when May follows,
> And the whitethroat builds, and all the swallows!

That first "and" feels as if the speaker is picking up where they left off: *And another thing!* The two "ands" that follow then feel like an embarrassment of riches: the speaker just keeps thinking of more and more lovely spring sights.

That effect feels particularly strong because of the speaker's phrasing here. Line 10 could mean, "And the whitethroat builds its nest, and all the swallows build theirs." Or it could mean something more like, "And the whitethroat builds its nest—and oh, there are so many swallows!" Either way, there's a sense of *building* here: of sheer springtime abundance, a wealth of birds.

As the speaker remembers the way the birds nest in May, the poem's language turns as musical as birdsong. Listen to the assonance and consonance here:

> And after April, when May follows,
> And the whitethroat builds, and all the swallows!

These long /ay/ sounds, gentle /aw/ sounds, and lilting /l/ sounds weave and dance like the birds they describe.

LINES 11-14

> *Hark, where my blossomed pear-tree in the hedge*
> *Leans to the field and scatters on the clover*
> *Blossoms and dewdrops—at the bent spray's edge—*
> *That's the wise thrush;*

Now, the speaker starts to sound almost as if lost in a dream, with England before their very eyes. They've moved from a description of sights one might see anywhere in England—swallows in flight, trees leafing out—to a vision of one tree in particular. This isn't just any tree: it's "my blossomed pear-tree," a tree that must have grown near the speaker's own home.

Again, the speaker's language is laden with euphonious sounds. Listen to the rich assonance and consonance here:

> Hark, where my blossomed pear-tree in the hedge
> Leans to the field and scatters on the clover
> Blossoms and dewdrops—at the bent spray's edge

These close-woven sounds make this scene sound as beautiful as it looks. Notice, too, the speaker's polyptoton on "blossomed" and "blossoms": this passage seems to burst with petals, too many for one "blossom" to suffice!

The speaker seems, at first, to suggest that readers *listen* to this tree: "Hark," they command. But it turns out that this description of the tree has just been the backdrop for what the speaker really wants the reader to listen to: the "wise thrush," who's perched on the "edge" of a "spray" of blossom, singing his heart out.

LINES 14-16

> *he sings each song twice over,*
> *Lest you should think he never could recapture*
> *The first fine careless rapture!*

In the previous lines, the speaker's mental camera slowly zoomed in on "the wise thrush," a songbird perched in a gorgeously blossoming pear tree. Now, the speaker anthropomorphizes this thrush as a miniature virtuoso, showing off for his adoring public. He never sings his song only once, the speaker observes, but "twice over":

> Lest you should think he never could recapture
> The first fine careless rapture!

In other words, by singing twice, the thrush proves that his song can sound just as effortlessly exultant the second time around.

Take a look at the change in the meter here:

> Lest you | should think | he nev- | er could | recapture
> The first fine careless rapture!

The speaker moves from a steady, traditional line of iambic pentameter (five da-DUMs) into a line of tetrameter—a line whose four stresses, wonderfully, make it sound more than a little like the cadence of thrush song! This short line also seems to ask readers to pause, as if they've stopped under the pear tree right alongside the speaker, sinking into that "rapture."

And it's truly worth lingering for a moment over these famous lines. Readers might think back to a time they discovered a piece of art they really love: a song, a book, a movie—or perhaps a poem. There's a special thrill in experiencing a wonderful artwork, a soon-to-be-favorite, for the very first time. And by definition, that's an experience one can only have *once* with each new discovery.

This thrush, then, does something almost miraculous: it creates that "first fine careless rapture" *again*! To this speaker's ear, there's something eternally *new* about the thrush's song: it never gets old, either to the thrush or his audience, no matter how many times he sings it.

In this way, the thrush's song seems an awful lot like spring itself. Spring, an ancient symbol of new life, rebirth, hope, and joy, is always a fresh delight. But it's also always the same—a point that the speaker makes clear with all these descriptions of what they know is happening in England, even though they're not there. That paradoxical combination of constancy and freshness is what's so wonderful about spring: it suggests that renewal is a permanent part of life.

The thrush thus seems almost to be the spokesbird for spring itself, here: singing the same song as always, and yet bringing his listeners fresh delight. Perhaps he's also the spokesbird for homesickness. What the speaker wants, more than anything, is the joy of being in a familiar place at a familiar time of year.

LINES 17-20

> *And though the fields look rough with hoary dew,*
> *All will be gay when noontide wakes anew*
> *The buttercups, the little children's dower*
> *—Far brighter than this gaudy melon-flower!*

The thought of the thrush's "raptur[ous]" song—always the same, and always freshly delightful—makes the speaker reflect on the other constant, comforting aspects of spring. Now, the speaker imagines a whole spring morning and the way it transforms the fields.

On spring mornings in England, the speaker recalls in a moment of vivid imagery, the fields "look rough with hoary dew": that is, morning dew weighs down the grasses into clumps and makes them look silvery-grey. But by "noontide," the "buttercups" will "wake[] anew," making the fields golden. (And notice, once again, the dense, euphonious assonance, alliteration, and consonance of the words "All will be gay when noontide wakes anew"!)

There's not just joy, but certainty in the speaker's voice here. The speaker knows that, just as they can count on the charm of the thrush's song, they can rely on the sun to rise and the buttercups to open, far away in England.

The speaker imagines these humble buttercups metaphorically as "the little children's dower"—in other words, the spring's special gift to children. And that makes sense: the buttercups, like "little children," are small, bright, new, and full of promise. And they rise up out of the "hoary" grass, an image that suggests old age: "hoary" is a word often used to describe silvery-white hair. The buttercups, the children, and the spring itself all speak of the hope of new life rising from old age and death.

Thinking of spring in England, in other words, puts the speaker in a philosophical mood. The speaker's homesickness isn't just about missing their "pear-tree" or their friends. It's about wanting to be in a place where the world makes sense to them—a place that gives them comfort, delight, and hope for renewal.

But, sadly for the speaker, they're not there. In the closing line of the poem, the speaker gives the only hint of where they might actually be when they complain that buttercups are "Far brighter than this gaudy melon-flower!"

This line brings the poem down to earth with a bump, in a pretty comical way. It's not as if the speaker is visiting a frozen wasteland or a smoky city: all along, they've been sitting in a gorgeous garden, where fresh melons are growing—somewhere a lot sunnier than England, the kind of place where one might be pretty pleased to be on holiday. But the sight of the "gaudy" melon blossom makes the speaker grumpy: those bright petals only look garish and flashy next to the speaker's memory of humble golden buttercups.

It doesn't matter, in other words, how pleasant the speaker's present surroundings are. Their homesickness means that, in this moment, only English beauty can really touch them. As the reader leaves the poem, they might imagine the speaker aiming a gloomy kick at a melon flower and heaving a sigh, yearning for thrushes, pale blossom, and warming fields.

SYMBOLS

SPRING

Spring, in this poem as in many others, symbolizes hope, joy, and renewal.

When the poem's speaker imagines the English countryside springing to life after the chill of winter, they see spring not just as a beautiful time, but a familiar one. All the same "blossoms" and all the same songbirds can be counted on to turn up and behave just as delightfully as they always do.

Spring, then, "recapture[s]" its own "first fine careless rapture" just as much as the singing "thrush" does: its recurring beauty is an image of hope and comfort.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "April's"
- **Line 9:** "April," "May"

POETIC DEVICES

IMAGERY

Detailed imagery of an English spring brings the speaker's homesick yearning to life—and lets the reader share that yearning.

Longing for home from "abroad," this poem's speaker seems almost transported by vivid memories. Take a look at this moment:

> That the lowest boughs and the brushwood sheaf
> Round the elm-tree bole are in tiny leaf,

Everything in this description is *specific*. The speaker seems to be getting right up close to the "lowest boughs" and the "elm-tree bole"—close enough to see the "tiny lea[ves]" that are only just beginning to peep out. The particularity of this image manages to conjure up all sorts of other details without even mentioning them: readers can practically see the lively green of those little leaves, and smell the fresh, damp earth.

A few lines later, the speaker gets even more particular:

> Hark, where my blossomed pear-tree in the hedge
> Leans to the field and scatters on the clover
> Blossoms and dewdrops—at the bent spray's edge—
> That's the wise thrush; [...]

The speaker doesn't just notice any old "pear-tree" here: it's "my blossomed pear-tree," a tree as familiar as an old friend. Describing this tree leaning over the grass to "scatter[...] blossoms and dewdrops" on the flowery field like gifts, the speaker again hints at even more sensory detail than the poem spells out—the sweetness of the "clover," the coolness of those "dewdrops."

Imagery even helps the speaker to spend the whole span of a morning in their imagined England:

> And though the fields look rough with hoary dew,
> All will be gay when noontide wakes anew
> The buttercups, [...]

The image of fields "rough with hoary dew" conjures up an early morning when the grass is flattened down under the weight of the dew, its greenness muted. Here, the speaker's imagery works like a time-lapse camera: before the reader's eyes, that dew evaporates, the grass stands up straight, and the "buttercups" open under the warm "noontide" sun. The speaker, these lines suggest, has seen this wonderful phenomenon countless times, enough to be sure that "all will be gay" again.

The poem's imagery thus immerses readers, not just in a generic English countryside, but in the speaker's own touching memories of an English spring.

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- **Lines 5-6:** "That the lowest boughs and the brushwood sheaf / Round the elm-tree bole are in tiny leaf,"
- **Lines 11-14:** "Hark, where my blossomed pear-tree in the hedge / Leans to the field and scatters on the clover / Blossoms and dewdrops—at the bent spray's edge— / That's the wise thrush;"
- **Lines 17-20:** "And though the fields look rough with hoary dew, / All will be gay when noontide wakes anew / The buttercups, the little children's dower / —Far brighter than this gaudy melon-flower!"

REPETITION

The poem's repetitions help readers to feel the speaker's longing for home.

The first and most poignant repetition here is the speaker's return to the words "in England": the words repeat no fewer than three times. This diacope suggests that the speaker's thoughts never stray far from their native country. That effect feels especially pronounced because these words bookend the first eight lines: the first stanza both starts and ends "in England," even though the speaker is far from England now.

Meaningful repetitions also turn up when the speaker begins to describe the beauty of the English spring. Polyptoton on "boughs" and "bough," "blossomed" and "blossoming," creates a feeling of overflowing natural abundance: branches and blossoms, these repetitions suggest, are absolutely everywhere

in the England of the speaker's imagination, leafing out and dropping white petals.

And listen to the speaker's anaphora/polysyndeton in these lines:

> And after April, when May follows,
> And the whitethroat builds, and all the swallows!

All those "ands" feel abundant, too—and conjure the speaker's pure, childlike enthusiasm for the glories of spring. It's as if they just keep remembering all the lovely sights they miss, one after the other.

Besides evoking the speaker's emotions, these repetitions also quietly echo one of the speaker's favorite qualities of spring: the way it comes back every year, "recaptur[ing]" its former loveliness again and again.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "in England"
- **Line 3:** "in England"
- **Line 5:** "boughs"
- **Line 7:** "bough"
- **Line 8:** "In England"
- **Line 9:** "And"
- **Line 10:** "And," "and"
- **Line 11:** "blossomed"
- **Line 13:** "Blossoms"

ANTHROPOMORPHISM

The poem's one moment of anthropomorphism turns a songbird into the voice of spring itself.

In lines 14-16, the speaker points out the "wise thrush" perched in a pear tree, singing away. This thrush "sings each song twice over," the speaker observes:

> Lest you should think he never could recapture
> The first fine careless rapture!

In other words, in this speaker's eyes, this anthropomorphized thrush is knowingly repeating his song, like a virtuoso violinist playing the same piece perfectly twice in a row—just to prove he can. There's something charming about the idea of a thrush showing off for his listeners like that: it makes it feel as if the thrush is consciously enjoying his role in the spring's loveliness, having just as much fun as the speaker is.

But there's more to it than that! The thrush isn't just note-perfect, he's "recaptur[ing]" the whole joyful spirit of his song, as if he's singing it for the very first time—again. Readers here might want to reflect on the first time they heard a favorite song, saw a favorite movie, or read a favorite book: that special thrill of experiencing something wonderful and completely new. That thrill, by definition, only happens once!

The thrush is thus performing a bit of a miracle here. But that miracle is also the miracle of spring itself: just like the thrush's song, this passage suggests, the spring happens over and over in just the same way—and feels completely new every time. Mirroring this annual magic, in the speaker's view, is what makes this thrush so "wise."

One little flicker of anthropomorphism thus opens the door to some of the poem's deepest feeling.

Where Anthropomorphism appears in the poem:

- **Lines 14-16:** "That's the wise thrush; he sings each song twice over, / Lest you should think he never could recapture / The first fine careless rapture!"

ENJAMBMENT

Frequent enjambments evoke the speaker's longing for England and the graceful blossoming of the spring.

Take a look at what enjambments do in the first four lines:

> Oh, to be in England
> Now that April's there,
> And whoever wakes in England
> Sees, some morning, unaware,

Here, enjambments leave "England" standing boldly out at the end of a line—twice. They even make the word into an identical rhyme. No points for guessing what's most on the speaker's mind!

And take a look at how enjambments work on the poem's rhythm in these lines:

> Hark, where my blossomed pear-tree in the hedge
> Leans to the field and scatters on the clover
> Blossoms and dewdrops— [...]

These enjambments make this passage of description run on as smoothly as a flowing stream. Perhaps this flow evokes both the speaker's reverie as they think of their very own "pear-tree" back at home and the effortless growth of all those springtime "blossoms."

But one of the poem's most notable enjambments creates, not a flow, but a burst of surprise:

> While the chaffinch sings on the orchard bough
> In England—now!

Here, as the speaker completes a long passage of rhythmic description, an enjambment works like a banana peel, sending readers skidding into an abrupt conclusion. It's as if the speaker

suddenly can't bear their homesickness anymore, and is forced to break their train of thought to collect themselves.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "England / Now"
- **Lines 3-4:** "England / Sees"
- **Lines 5-6:** "sheaf / Round"
- **Lines 7-8:** "bough / In"
- **Lines 11-12:** "hedge / Leans"
- **Lines 12-13:** "clover / Blossoms"
- **Lines 15-16:** "recapture / The"
- **Lines 18-19:** "anew / The"

CAESURA

Caesurae help to pace the poem, fine-tuning its mood and atmosphere.

Many of the caesurae in the poem are mid-line commas, like these:

> And after April, || when May follows,
> And the whitethroat builds, || and all the swallows!

Pauses like these keep lines from building up too much momentum, creating a gentle, swinging pace. It's as if the speaker, in their imagination, is out for a springtime stroll, looking from side to side to see the "whitethroat" nests and the "swallows" swooping.

Earlier in the poem, two caesurae in a row help to build some dramatic tension:

> And whoever wakes in England
> Sees, || some morning, || unaware,

Those two pauses slow the line down enough to raise readers' curiosity: what exactly are those who "wake[] in England" so surprised to see in "April"? Caesura gives this line an anticipatory, *oh-boy-oh-boy* kind of feeling.

But caesura can also have more poignant effects. Take a look at this moment from the end of the first stanza:

> In England— || now!

That dash marks a strong break, one that feels even more pronounced in an extra-short line of iambic dimeter. Both the brevity and the caesura make this line feel choked off—or, perhaps, choked up. Thinking too hard about the beauty of their faraway homeland, this caesura suggests, might have made the speaker a little teary.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** "Sees, some," "morning, unaware"
- **Line 8:** "England—now!"
- **Line 9:** "April, when"
- **Line 10:** "builds, and"
- **Line 13:** "dewdrops—at"
- **Line 14:** "thrush; he"
- **Line 19:** "buttercups, the"

ASSONANCE

Assonance makes this poem sound as melodious as the birdsongs it describes.

For instance, listen to the sweetness of the vowel sounds in these lines:

> And after April, when May follows,
> And the whitethroat builds, and all the swallows!

The interweaving sounds here make these lines sound as natural and harmonious as the movement of the seasons. The long /ay/ of "April" and "May," the short /ih/ of "April" and "builds," and the /aw/ of "all" and "swallows" (supported by lilting /l/ consonance) come together to make this passage musical.

There's a similar effect just a few lines later:

> Hark, where my blossomed pear-tree in the hedge
> Leans to the field and scatters on the clover
> Blossoms and dewdrops—at the bent spray's edge—

All the vowel sounds here travel in pairs, like doves—and even create a subtle moment of internal rhyme between "where" and "pear." The overall effect feels balanced, euphonious, and—again—musical.

It only makes sense that this poem's speaker would choose beautiful sounds. Terribly homesick, this speaker can't think of a thing lovelier than England in the spring, and these sounds capture that loveliness. The assonance here thus helps the poem to feel, not just musical, but poignant.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** "some," "unaware"
- **Line 5:** "sheaf"
- **Line 6:** "tree," "leaf"
- **Line 7:** "chaffinch sings"
- **Line 9:** "April," "May"
- **Line 10:** "all," "swallows"
- **Line 12:** "Leans," "field"
- **Line 13:** "Blossoms," "dewdrops," "bent," "edge"
- **Line 14:** "wise," "twice"
- **Line 18:** "gay," "noontide," "wakes," "anew"

- **Line 19:** "little children's"

ALLITERATION

Alliteration gives the poem moments of emphasis and drama.

Perhaps the most meaningful moments of alliteration come in lines 15-16:

> That's the wise thrush; he sings each song twice over,
> Lest you should think he never could recapture
> The first fine careless rapture!

Describing a thrush's lovely song—which repeats the same strain twice—the poem also uses alliterative *sounds* twice. The beauty of the thrush's song, the beauty of the ever-renewed spring, and the beauty of the poem itself thus all reflect each other!

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** "boughs," "brushwood"
- **Line 6:** "bole"
- **Line 13:** "Blossoms," "bent"
- **Line 14:** "sings," "song"
- **Line 15:** "recapture"
- **Line 16:** "first fine," "rapture"

CONSONANCE

Much of the consonance in this poem travels alongside assonance and alliteration—and like those devices, it just plain sounds lovely, suiting this poem's springtime raptures.

For instance, take another look at these famous lines, which we've already glanced at in the alliteration section:

> Lest you should think he never could recapture
> The first fine careless rapture!

Consonance heightens this passage's already musical language. Notice that the consonance here often echoes the alliteration, so these words sound even more closely woven together: the sounds here are as neat and pure as birdsong.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** "Sees, some," "morning, unaware"
- **Line 5:** "lowest boughs," "brushwood sheaf"
- **Line 6:** "elm," "tree," "bole," "tiny leaf"
- **Line 9:** "after," "follows"
- **Line 10:** "builds," "all," "swallows"
- **Line 11:** "blossomed"
- **Line 12:** "Leans," "field," "clover"
- **Line 13:** "Blossoms"
- **Line 14:** "sings," "song," "twice"
- **Line 15:** "Lest," "recapture"
- **Line 16:** "first fine," "careless rapture"

VOCABULARY

Unaware (Line 4) - Surprisedly, unexpectedly, without warning.

Brushwood sheaf (Line 5) - Undergrowth; low shrubs that grow around trees.

Bole (Line 6) - A tree trunk.

Chaffinch (Line 7) - A kind of songbird, with a pinkish face and breast.

Whitethroat (Line 10) - Another kind of songbird.

Hark (Line 11) - A command meaning "Listen!"

The bent spray (Line 13) - That is, the hanging, blossoming branches of the pear tree, which form a bouquet-like "spray."

Thrush (Line 14) - Yet another kind of songbird! Thrushes are famous for their elaborate and lovely songs.

Lest (Line 15) - Just in case.

Hoary (Line 17) - Greyish or whitish. In other words, the dew on the fields in the morning mutes their greenness and makes them look dim.

Gay (Line 18) - Here, this word means both "happy, joyful" and "brilliantly colored."

Dower (Line 19) - A gift, especially an honorary or ceremonial one. (The word is more usually used to describe either an inheritance or the money a new bride's parents traditionally gave a groom.)

Gaudy (Line 20) - Garish, lurid, too brightly colored—with connotations of vulgarity!

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Home-Thoughts, from Abroad" doesn't follow any traditional form. Instead, Browning shapes the poem to reflect the speaker's emotional journey:

- First, an eight-line stanza introduces the speaker's longing for home, where spring has just begun.
- Then, the stanza break makes it seem as if the speaker falls quiet for a moment, reflecting—only to get swept up again in a longer twelve-line stanza of description.

All in all, this shape suggests that the speaker is brooding a

little, alternating between passionate yearning and melancholy quiet. The two stanzas feel like two separate outpourings of feeling; in that meditative break in the middle, readers might imagine the speaker getting lost in a homesick reverie.

METER

This poem doesn't follow any one pattern of meter. Instead, it changes its surging, emotive rhythms to suit whatever the speaker happens to be describing (and feeling) at the moment.

For example, take a look at the first stanza. The first four lines here are all in trimeter, meaning they use three strong stresses per line. These lines mostly use trochees (metrical feet with a DUM-da rhythm), but throw in a couple of anapests (metrical feet with a da-da-DUM rhythm) for flavor. Here's how that sounds:

> Oh, to | be in | England
> Now that | April's | there,
> And whoev- | er wakes | in England
> Sees, some | morning, | unaware,

These lines' rhythms aren't perfectly regular, but they still throb like a heartbeat, helping to evoke the speaker's longing.

Then, as the speaker gets more and more homesick, the poem switches to longer lines of tetrameter—*four* strong stresses. Here, the poem weaves anapests together with iambs, feet with a da-DUM rhythm. Listen to the difference:

> That the low | -est boughs | and the brush | -wood sheaf
> Round the elm | -tree bole | are in ti | -ny leaf,
> While the chaf- | finch sings | on the or- | chard bough

These steady, hypnotic rhythms make the speaker seem caught up in fond memories of an English spring.

But all that nostalgia come to an abrupt halt in the first stanza's final line:

> In Eng- | land—now!

This line of iambic dimeter—just two iambs—cuts off the rhythm so firmly that it seems as if the speaker has choked up, remembering suddenly that they're not in the "England" they've just imagined so vividly. A surprising caesura makes that effect even more powerful.

And this is just a taste of the way the poem uses meter to evoke feeling! The second stanza plays similar tricks. Throughout the poem, the meter feels as organic and spontaneous as the new spring growth it describes—and as emotive as the speaker.

RHYME SCHEME

The poem's varied rhyme scheme moves back and forth between two rhyme patterns. It starts with alternating rhymes like these:

> ABAB

Then, it moves into rhymed couplets like these:

> CCDD

Similar patterns appear in the second stanza, which moves from couplets to alternating rhymes to couplets again.

These sudden swoops between patterns of rhyme evoke the way that nostalgia for the English springtime sweeps the speaker right off their feet. Throughout, the poem's rhymes feel harmonious, sweet, and simple—just like the speaker's memories.

SPEAKER

This poem's melancholy speaker is very, very English. Even "abroad," in a warm foreign country where the "melon-flower" blooms, all the speaker can think of is how spring is coming along at "home." The speaker's longing for the touching, humble beauties of their native countryside suggests that, no matter where they go, their heart is in England. And their sensitive portrait of the remembered English spring makes them seem like a thoughtful, poetic soul.

Readers who know a bit about Robert Browning might well interpret this speaker as the poet himself. Browning wrote this poem when he was traveling in Italy—a country where he and his wife, fellow poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning, would eventually spend many years. This was a glamorous life, but also a kind of exile, as the pair had to elope there in order to evade Elizabeth's cruel father. Robert would only return to England after Elizabeth's death.

SETTING

The poem spends most of its time describing a place where the speaker *isn't*.

All readers learn about the foreign land the speaker is currently writing from is that the "gaudy melon-flower" blooms there. Readers who are familiar with Browning's biography might suspect that the unnamed foreign country here is Italy, where Browning and his wife Elizabeth Barrett Browning spent many years. But the poem itself doesn't say so—an omission that suggests just how little the speaker cares about whatever country they seem to have ended up in, at least at the moment. (Also note that the Brownings had visited, but not moved, to Italy when this poem was written.)

It's thus not unreasonable to say that the poem is set, not in that country, but in the speaker's memories of their native land. Homesick and longing for England in the springtime, with its

trees coming into "tiny leaf" and its "raptur[ous]" birdsong, the speaker is almost transported there.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Robert Browning (1812-1889) was a great Victorian writer—and one quite unlike those around him. Considered a minor poet for most of his early career, Browning became famous toward the end of his life for his wild dramatic monologues: theatrical poems spoken in the voices of characters from murderous Italian dukes to good-hearted 16th-century soldiers. "Home-Thoughts, from Abroad," by contrast, is one of Browning's more personal, intimate poems, clearly rooted in his own experiences.

Many of Browning's contemporaries didn't quite know what to do with his poetry, which—with its experimental rhythms and sometimes earthy language—rarely conformed to the elegant standards of his time. Many suggested that he'd make a better novelist than a poet. Even Oscar Wilde, a great Browning enthusiast, couldn't resist quipping that "[George] Meredith is a prose Browning, and so is Browning." The Modernist poets of the early 20th century, though, admired Browning's poetry for the very strangeness and narrative vigor that put so many of the Victorians off.

Browning's greatest influence was, without question, his beloved wife, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, whose poetry he deeply admired. This literary duo critiqued and championed each other's work for 14 happy years of marriage. But like many Victorian writers, Browning also followed in the lyrical and imaginative footsteps of the earlier Romantic poets. As a young man, he particularly respected Shelley as both a poet and a radical political thinker.

While Browning was ahead of his time in many ways, more and more writers and thinkers learned to admire and appreciate his work as the 19th century rolled into its final years. And his reputation has only grown since his death. "Home-Thoughts, from Abroad," with its loving (and patriotic) portrait of an English springtime, is still one of England's favorite poems.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"Home-Thoughts, from Abroad" draws on Robert Browning's own travels abroad in Italy—a country that would eventually become his home for a time. His emigration was sparked by one of literature's most touching love stories.

In 1845, Browning paid his first visit to a rising star in the literary world: Elizabeth Barrett. Unusually for a woman writer of the time, Barrett had become wildly famous; Browning was only one of many readers to be moved by her soulful, elegant poetry. He wrote her a fan letter, and the two began a warm correspondence. Eventually, they fell deeply in love.

Barrett's tyrannical father was having none of it, however. Besides preferring to keep his talented daughter (and her earnings) to himself, he disapproved of Browning, who was several years younger than Barrett—unconventional in a Victorian marriage—and not yet a successful or well-known writer himself. In order to defy Mr. Barrett, the couple had to elope; they left England for Italy in 1846. Outraged, Elizabeth's father disinherited her.

The newlywed Brownings, undaunted, set up house in Florence, where they would live for the next 14 years. Their careers and their marriage flourished. But, as this poem attests, both knew what it was like to be homesick, too. Robert would one day return to his native country—but only after Elizabeth died in his arms at the age of just 55.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Browning's Legacy — Read a bicentenary appreciation of Browning that discusses his enduring importance. (https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2012/may/06/browning-poetry-bicentenary-dickens)
- A Short Biography — Learn more about Browning's life and work via the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/robert-browning)
- Browning's Work — Visit the British Library's website to learn more about Browning's poetry. (https://www.bl.uk/learning/langlit/poetryperformance/browning/josephinehart/aboutbrowning.html)
- The Poem Aloud — Listen to the actor Geoffrey Palmer reading the poem (with a poignant musical accompaniment). (https://youtu.be/8DgAz7ksiJM)
- The Brownings — Learn about Browning's marriage to fellow poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning. The two lovingly supported and influenced each other's work. (https://victorianweb.org/authors/ebb/ebbio1.html)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER ROBERT BROWNING POEMS

- How they Brought the Good News from Ghent to Aix
- Life in a Love
- Meeting at Night
- My Last Duchess
- Porphyria's Lover

HOW TO CITE

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